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SUBJECT: WOMEN IN INDIA: BREAKING THROUGH THE GLASS CEILING

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¶1. Summary: Traditional views of the proper role of women in society create the largest barrier to women's success in business, according to some of Mumbai's top female executives. In a roundtable discussion with women leaders from Mumbai hosted by the Consul General, they explained that breaking through the "glass ceiling" takes perseverance-to balance a career with the continued burden of traditional "women's work" in the home, and the support of a non-traditional family. This cable looks at the experiences of five successful female executives in Mumbai, the corporate capital of India, how they rose to positions of power, and their efforts to maintain successful careers. End Summary.

WHO THEY ARE AND WHERE THEY CAME FROM:

¶2. On March 26, the Consul General invited five female executives to a roundtable discussion on their struggles to develop successful careers in the largely male-dominated corporate world. The roundtable participants included women from elite backgrounds as well as those who rose through hardscrabble efforts:

--Sushila Bhakar, Deputy General Manager for Communications at Essar Group, a mining and metals company. In the village where she comes from, in the northern state of Haryana, girls were married off by age 11 or 12. All of her cousins were grandmothers in their 30s.

--Christabelle Noronha, Vice President of Publications and Media at Tata and Sons, Ltd., is the only female vice president at the company. She attributes her professional drive to necessity - her father died when she was seventeen, her mother had no employable skills, and her sister had a medical disability.

--Poorvi Chothani, President of the American Alumni Association and head of her own law firm - all women, by happenstance - came from a privileged background and was sent to college by her family. However, her family married her off during her second year of college. According to her, her mother told her future husband that he could stop Poorvi's education so as not to disrupt the family.

--Roopa Purushothaman is an Indian-American who came to India as a co-founder of an investment firm, Future Capital Holdings, where she serves as Chief Economist. She explained that her understanding of the cultural role of women came from her Malayali (Kerala) heritage where women have a much more

prominent leadership role by tradition.

--Dr. Indu Shahani, Dean of H.R. College and honorary Sheriff of Mumbai, attributes her success to becoming a teacher, a traditional women's occupation. (Note: Sherriff of Mumbai is an honorary position with no law enforcement powers, but higher in protocol ranking than the Mayor. She is charged with raising awareness for selected city programs such as women's empowerment, domestic violence and encouraging youth participation in society. End Note.) She said in education men, rather than women, face a glass ceiling. She attributes her appointment as honorary Sheriff of Mumbai to the support from students she has met over her 30 plus years as an educator.

#### DAILY LIFE

13. More than any challenges at work, these women all described the demands of home life as the biggest hurdle to overcome in achieving professional success. According to the women, success resulted from having the fortitude and perseverance to satisfy the traditional demands of family and then extra energy to pursue education and careers rather than by shedding their traditional roles. They each spoke of being expected to fulfill the traditional role of women as caretakers, feeders, and nurturers for their families before heading off for work in the morning, as well as when they returned. Even in a culture where domestic help is very affordable, the role of mother, chief of the household, and wife cannot be hired out, they agreed. Chothani acknowledged that by foregoing after-work socializing and networking, she has missed out attracting new clients. Shahani recalled the pain one day when her son had a fever of 104 degrees, but she had to go to work because she was the only person with the key to the cupboard where end-of-year exams were secured. Bhakar and Noronha are single, limiting family demands on their time. Noronha, though, has adapted her

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career over the years to be able to take care of her ailing mother, resigning from a prestigious journalism job to be a freelance writer so that she could spend more time at home. She said she "lost her safety net" when her father died, pushing her into a career at an early age.

#### EXTENDED FAMILIES WITH A NON-TRADITIONAL TWIST

14. For most of these women, there were two common threads to their success: supportive fathers or husbands and an extended family to help with child care issues. Shahani credits her success to her husband who has been very supportive of her work. She quickly clarified that he does not wash dishes or make sure there is food in the house, but at least when the family lived in London, her husband did help with changing diapers. Shahani also credits her mother and mother-in-law who helped take care of her family so that she could focus on her work when needed. She lamented that for the current generation of young professional women, living in a mobile society with nuclear families rather than extended families, their mothers or mothers-in-law may not be available to help care for the family. Similarly, Chothani lauded her husband who supported her education, even funding her two years of study in the U.S. to obtain her Master's in Law degree while her children were still young. Her husband stayed in India with the boys. Bhakar attributes her success to her father who was a military officer with a more worldly view of what women could become. She said he never foisted village traditions on her, but instead encouraged her education and career. None mentioned mothers encouraging them to success outside the home. To the contrary, Chothani's mother even gave her blessing to curtailing her daughter's education once she was married off. Rather than seeing men as guards preventing entrance to the higher echelons, for these women, the men in their lives opened the gates while women were the torch bearers of tradition.

NO WOMEN MENTORS, BUT THE OLD RULES STILL WORK

15. These women had no mentors to teach them how to negotiate through a male-dominated arena; each represents a first in their field or in their company. They did not have other women to observe, no one to teach them how to adapt to an all male work environment, no vanguard to open corporate doors for them. Twenty years ago their success in corporate life would have been unheard of, they said. Though there were no female mentors within their corporate structures, the women credited Indira Gandhi and her strength as a leader for giving them hope of what women could achieve. While they acknowledged that Gandhi became Prime Minister as a result of dynastic politics in India, they believed that her strong leadership and the example she set for what women could accomplish softened their path to success.

16. With no one to teach them how to compete in male-dominated arenas, they have relied on the skills they learned within their families. Shahani, in her role as Sheriff of Mumbai, heads an all-male board. What she finds most useful, and most appreciated by her colleagues, is her excellent organizational skills which come from years of juggling family, home, and work needs at peak efficiency. While having a female leader is still a new experience for her peers, she believes that they all take pride in improving their effectiveness under her leadership.

17. Noronha was reminded that, as in many families, male co-workers are more comfortable with a woman in a nurturing, backseat role rather than in command. Noronha related having to challenge her male peers shortly upon her arrival at Tata and Sons, refusing to launch a website they had created which she believed was professionally unacceptable. She took her concerns to her manager rather than directly confronting her peers, and argued for improving its quality. She told her mother that it might be her last day with the company, but she was willing to risk her job rather than accept lower quality work. In the end, her managers supported her and ordered the website to be re-done. The price, however, was that she encountered hostility from some of the men she had challenged. To earn the favor of her male colleagues, she quietly helped them with their writing without letting others know. Over the course of time, her work group has become all women. Despite a lower salary than her

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male peers, Noronha takes pride in the work of her unit. Overall, she said, Tata and Sons is a meritocracy and promotes those who prove their value to the company; her secondary status is still better at Tata than it might be elsewhere.

18. Several of the women mentioned that it is not uncommon for male corporate officials to ask about a woman's child bearing plans, and refuse to hire those who say they plan to have children. There is still a preconception, they said, that women will drop out of the work force when they have children - a bias they concede is borne out in practice. Unanimously, the women insisted that India would be a far more developed society if it harnessed the collective intellectual capabilities of so many women who leave the workforce due to family demands. Discrimination does exist, they agreed, but there are also shining examples of progressive corporations such as ICICI bank, which has a nursery/day care on the premises to retain exceptional women employees. (Note: Interestingly, ICICI's current CEO is a female. End Note.) They hoped that this model, if widely adopted, would help India capitalize on the knowledge and talents of those sitting out of the workforce.

WOMEN'S ROLES EXPANDING, BUT STILL LIMITED  
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19. While the experience of these women is proof of the widening opportunities for women in corporate India, our interlocutors were still aware that women are exceptionally rare in certain traditionally-male bastions. Bhakar said that while there are now more women on the corporate relations team, women remain largely in secretarial positions in the manufacturing and mining divisions of ESSAR. Noronha noted that while Tata and Sons is generally a very progressive company, there were no women in the

upper echelons in the manufacturing branches of the company.  
(Note: Indeed, Congenoffs were unable to locate a female contact in the manufacturing sector to invite to this discussion. At least in Mumbai, finance, economic, communications, education and nursing are the new "pink collar" jobs in India. End Note.)  
One new field opening up for women is sales. Purushothaman suggested that studies have shown women to be more successful at selling insurance products than men, largely because the customer base is primarily women. In pharmaceutical sales, a far more technical field, however, there were rarely women.

¶10. Comment: While this glimpse into the lives of women in corporate India is only a tiny fraction of the experience of women in India, it provides a cross section of the vanguard of women breaking the glass ceiling. For today's young women in Mumbai, India presents a much wider array of female role models, including the country's President, two Chief Ministers, several members of Parliament, movie directors, Air Force pilots, and CEOs. Though today's aspiring women executives may suffer the lack of extended families to help them manage the competing demands of home and family, tomorrow's corporations may be more women-friendly and adapt, as ICICI bank has, to keep the best and the brightest employees in the workforce. End Comment.  
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